LESSONS LEARNED: A REVIEW OF THE KOSOVO INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY CHANGE AND RECONCILIATION PROGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

The unrest in Kosovo in March 2004 served as a stark reminder that, not even a decade removed from war, it is politically and socially fragile and the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding is a slow one. The lack of real progress delegating governing authority from the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to the Kosovar Provisional Institutions of Self Government (PISG) has led to frustration. As talks over the final status of Kosovo continue to stall, Kosovars increasingly feel powerless to participate in the institutions and structures that affect their lives. The voices of minorities, women and youth are often marginalized and excluded from decision-making. The key to ensuring that local-level conflicts do not escalate and embroil all of Kosovo in further unrest depends greatly on the creation of local structures and relationships through which Kosovars can proactively address community problems, air grievances and negotiate constructive agreements.

Recognizing these challenges, U.S.-based international nonprofit Partners for Democratic Change (Partners) applied for and received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2006 to implement the Kosovo Inclusive Community Change and Reconciliation (KICCR) Program. Partners worked in cooperation with Partners-Kosova Center for Conflict Management (Partners-Kosova or PK), an independent Kosovar NGO that is a member of the Partners for Democratic Change International network.

The KICCR project contributed to USAID/Kosovo’s cross-cutting objective related to conflict and reconciliation while also promoting effective partnerships between civil society and the government in the target municipalities, (SO 2.1). The project produced tangible results directly addressing the cross-cutting impact of conflict between communities, which impedes progress toward achievement of all USAID strategic objectives.

This report provides a summary of the program and an analysis of the key challenges and successes, with the goal of providing lessons that may be applicable to future projects in Kosovo or in other post-conflict contexts. However, it should be noted that the context in Kosovo in 2007 was so unusual and so fluid that any lesson learned will not easily be applicable to other projects elsewhere, or even subsequent projects in Kosovo.

KICCR PROJECT OVERVIEW

The one-year KICCR program contributed to reconciliation in Kosovo by empowering community members and leaders to work together toward the shared goal of improving the quality of life in their communities.
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**Approach**

Partners’ “Inclusive Community Change Model (ICCM),” on which the KICCR methodology was based, emphasizes broad participation, allowing marginalized groups as well as the majority to have a voice in decisions that affect their everyday quality of life. It is a shared interest of all these groups to increase the inclusiveness and transparency of local governance. The KICCR methodology leveraged this shared interest to mobilize multiethnic participation in development projects, resulting in small but sustainable improvements in interethnic relations.

Segregation and “boycotting” are pervasive methods of handling conflict in Kosovo, resulting in the fact that many leaders and citizens have never had the opportunity to develop skills for constructive engagement with other ethnic groups. Many multiethnic projects in Kosovo have been ineffective because they asked groups to work together without spending time building the capacity of participants to do so. Often, so-called “capacity building” consists of only a brief training, after which participants are expected to change their ingrained habits and methods. In KICCR, the community facilitators were introduced to skills at the training sessions, and then had the opportunity to practice these skills with the advice and feedback of experienced trainers and mediators over the course of the entire year. This approach is more time consuming than bringing in international trainers to directly train the communities, but creates a multiplier effect and sustainability impact, whereby local facilitators have the tools to further disseminate these skills outside the confines of this project.

Partners approaches ethnic integration from the perspective that real change must occur at the local level. KICCR was designed to support local communities in making small but sustainable steps towards better interethnic relationships. These steps toward creating stable, cooperative local communities will build the foundation for lasting peace in Kosovo. The KICCR methodology culminated in small grant projects that were uniquely tailored to the needs of the communities in each of the municipalities. Because the projects were envisioned and implemented by multiethnic groups of local citizens with the support and participation of the municipality, the results of the projects are sustainable and will provide benefits for the participating communities for many years to come.

**Participating Communities**

Four target communities were selected to participate in KICCR: Bablak/Babljak (in Ferizaj/Uroševac municipality), Lipjan/Lipljan, Rahovec/Orahovac, and Viti/Vitina. Each community has a unique set of challenges that hinder ethnic integration and conflict mitigation efforts. These challenges offer a microcosm of the difficulties facing reintegration efforts in Kosovo as a whole.

- **Bablak/Babljak**
  This village has been a leader within the municipality of Ferizaj/ Uroševac in welcoming 36 returned Serb IDP families and creating an environment in which returnees are able to re-integrate into everyday life. However, concerns about security and other issues like access to education have already caused some
returned families to leave. Many young people migrate to larger cities as soon as they are able due to the lack of economic and leisure opportunities, taking with them the hope of a sustainable multiethnic future.

- **Rahovec/Orahovac**
  The key challenges in this rural and agricultural municipality are related to economic development and job creation, as without the prospect of an improved economy there are strong incentives for Serb residents to remain isolated and dependent on parallel, ethnically-segregated structures.

- **Lipjan/Lipljan**
  This diverse municipality is home to many returned families, as well as minority residents who have remained in their homes throughout the past 10 years. The municipal governmental authorities, like many in Kosovo, are inexperienced in engaging citizens from all communities in cooperative, democratic practices such as public consultation on budgeting and other matters. Serbian and other local communities feel excluded from conversations about community development, especially infrastructure.

- **Viti/Vitina**
  A key challenge to reconciliation in this municipality is that many of the Serb residents live in isolated Serb-majority villages outside of the town of Viti/Vitina, and find it difficult to get their voices heard in local governance and otherwise participate fully in the social and economic reconstruction of the municipality.

**Program Components**

1. **Capacity-building for multiethnic teams of facilitators**

   KICCR’s capacity building component encompassed a broad range of “learning and doing” activities. 23 people from the four target municipalities were trained as community facilitators (Facilitator Teams or FTs). The initial training sessions focused on two tested and proven methodologies that Partners has helped pioneer in Southeastern Europe over the past two decades: Mediation, and Partners’ Inclusive Community Change and Mobilization (ICCM) Model. The training provided participants with the tools necessary to mobilize diverse stakeholders, resolve potential conflicts and peacefully achieve consensus on community issues.

   Taking into account the skill profile of the selected participants, Partners-Kosova decided to also include training in project design and proposal writing. This turned out to be one of the most challenging aspects of the program for many participants, for which they needed a lot of support, advice and mentoring throughout the project.

2. **Collaborative assessment of community conflicts & development needs**

   Thus trained, Facilitator Teams met with a range of community stakeholders including: municipal officials, NGO representatives, youth, police, and village councils to assess the
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sources of interethnic tension, miscommunication and conflict in their communities. With PK support, the FTs convened and led Working Group meetings to discuss these sources of conflict and come up with ideas for small-scale projects that could contribute to solving them. During these often contentious meetings, FTs used their mediation and facilitation skills to help community members stay focused on their joint interest in improving the quality of life for all residents of the municipalities.

In Bablak/Babljak the Facilitator Team determined that the lack of education and employment opportunities for youth, particularly Serb youth, was the main barrier to ethnic reconciliation. The Lipjan/Lipljan group felt that greater transparency in the municipal budgeting process would ease ethnic tension and promote inter-group dialogue. Promoting growth in the agriculture industry in Kosovo in order to improve the quality of life for Albanian and Serbian farmers in Rahovec/Orahovac was identified as a key issue there. And in Viti/Vitina, the Facilitator Team felt that communication between villages and the municipal government was inadequate due to the lack of functioning Village Councils.

3. Small grants for community development projects

As a result of these assessments and working group sessions, four community project proposals, one from each target community, were submitted in Spring 2007. For the FTs with members lacking experience dealing with donors and proposal writing, it was extremely difficult to link a concrete development project to their conflict assessments and write a proposal that met program criteria. In the case of Lipjan/Lipljan, the FT’s initial proposal was rejected by Partners. Many in the group thought of international development work solely in terms of infrastructure building, and had difficulty coming up with logical ideas focusing on improving human capital and working relationships.

Project criteria included: a positive effect on ethnic integration; involvement of minorities, women and young people as participants and stakeholders; demonstration of community and municipality support with at least US$1000 in cash or in-kind contributions from the municipality, local businesses or other non-US government sources; potential to deliver positive results in a short period of time; and a clear plan to sustain the results beyond the end of the project.

After intensive coaching and feedback on multiple proposal drafts from Partners and PK, all of the communities were finally able to submit proposals that clearly addressed the problems they had identified and that had the potential to significantly improve interethnic relationships and the quality of life for all community residents.

– Bablak/Babljak: To create more free-time and educational activities for youth, both majority and minority, in Bablak/Babljak and the surrounding villages, the Facilitator Team developed the “Education for Everybody” project to create a new multilingual community library. Leading this process was a multiethnic Library Steering Committee, composed of 6 Serbs and 6 Albanians, which was responsible for procuring supplies, determining library priorities (such as what books to acquire) and seeking additional donations and funding.
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− **Lipjan/Lipljan**: The Facilitator Team developed the “**Promoting Communication and Reconciliation in Lipjan/Lipljan**” project, a three-day participatory budgeting workshop held in late July 2007 to inform citizens about the municipality’s budgeting process and to develop a framework for greater public participation in the budgeting process, thus promoting greater communication between stakeholders, greater oversight by civil society organization and greater input from minority communities into local governance and development.

− **Rahovec/Orahovac**: Support was provided to the multiethnic Agrokop Agricultural Association as part of the “**Planting the Seeds for a Better Future**” project in support of efforts to increase its multiethnic membership, teach Rahovec/Orahovac farmers about good farming techniques and the privatization process and encourage ethnic integration through the establishment of economic links between farmers from different ethnicities.

− **Viti/Vitina**: A framework for establishing Village Councils, selecting members and recognizing their important role as a bridge between isolated rural villages and the municipality was established by Viti/Vitina Municipal Council in 2003, but in reality the councils were ineffective and in some cases existed only on paper. The Viti/Vitina working group proposed the “**Citizen: Decision-making Factor**” project to advocate for the institutionalization of the Village Councils and to build the capacity of existing councilors to effectively act on behalf of their village constituents. As part of the project, a 20-person multiethnic (11 Albanians and 9 Serbs) Citizen Participation Group (CPG) was formed and trained in advocacy, conflict management, English, and project development skills.

4. **Shared learning through a final conference**

In August 2007 a final program conference was held in Pristina involving all four Facilitator Teams, central and municipal government representatives, international donors and a team from U.S. KFOR. The conference was only the second time where the wider KICCR participant group was able to meet and share experiences and best practices (the other being the initial training seminars). The discussions were fruitful but short. It was clear by the end of the conference that all community groups would have liked more opportunities to meet with one another. Partners and PK received repeated requests to hold tours for Facilitator Teams to visit the other community projects and teams of facilitators. Partners believes that a mid-program conference, around the small grant project development phase, would have been a good opportunity for facilitators to build relationships, critique one another’s work and help each other refine their project proposals.
KEY CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

In participant evaluations following trainings and the final conference, the overall message could be summarized as “more of the same, please!” This response suggests great success, although building healthy local communities and decreasing ethnic tension in Kosovo remains a very long-term goal towards which KICCR has made significant, but necessarily localized, “baby” steps in four small communities. In addition, the political circumstances of the time period in which KICCR was implemented were very unusual, making the task of extracting “lessons learned” that might be applicable in other contexts extremely difficult.

Lesson 1: Under polarizing political circumstances, it takes time to build the trust necessary to convince people to participate.

At only one year in length, the primary challenge of the KICCR Program was achieving concrete results in a short period of time. This was made especially difficult due to the political environment in Kosovo surrounding final status negotiations (or deadlock). With the lack of a final status solution, multiethnic programs face nervous, uncooperative minority communities and sharp divides within ethnic groups between those who agree to participate and those who choose to boycott such programs. Partners observed this hesitancy during every phase of the project, from Facilitator Team selection to small grant project implementation. For example, PK and Partners had a difficult time mobilizing Serbs, particularly youth, to participate as Facilitators. PK held a series of meetings in each community with Serb leaders to convince them that the program would bring benefit to their villages without prejudicing the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue. While this drew in greater numbers of Serb willing to participate in the program, the result was also that the Serb members generally were older adults and not youth. Had the program been held over a longer time span, it would have been possible to build trust among minority communities and gradually encourage more diverse (i.e. women, youth and other minority group) participation in program activities.

The timing and time span of the project also presented other challenges. In two of the four target communities the wider Serb community had some problems with a member of the Facilitator Team. For example, in Bablak/Babljak, a FT member was also a village leader. He was removed from his post during the course of the KICCR Program, which hampered efforts to draw in greater numbers of Serb participants. Partners does not know the exact reason for his removal, but he, Partners and PK speculate that it was because of his involvement in the program and the delicate political situation surrounding final status discussions.

Lesson 2: Plan for the need to build capacity in basic project design, proposal writing and financial management.
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In three of the participating communities, at least one member of the Facilitator Team either worked for an NGO or had worked on a community development project. This was not the case in Lipjan/Lipljan. Partners found that Facilitator Teams lacking members with experience dealing with donors, proposal development and/or community development had a much more difficult conceptualizing the goals and objectives of the program and developing projects that met program criteria. Many in the Lipjan/Lipljan community see international development work as infrastructure repair or construction and had trouble envisioning the benefit in human capacity development to mitigate conflict and promote community welfare.

The analytical process of diagnosing issues in a community and then coming up with concrete, logical projects that contribute to solving those problems is a learned skill. The KICCR participating communities were specifically chosen because they have been relatively underserved by the international reconstruction and development projects in Kosovo. However, this meant that program participants needed a lot of help in the small grant project design phase. Were the KICCR methodology to be rolled out to other municipalities in Kosovo, each FT should include at least one person from an NGO or other group with project design experience who could help his/her peers, and more time should be spent training facilitators in these important skills.

**Lesson 3: Citizens want to participate in local governance decisions.**

Two of the small grant projects, in Viti/Vitina and Lipjan/Lipljan, addressed the issue of municipal government not taking citizen priorities into account in decision-making processes. Serb and minority citizens felt that they, in particular, had little say in how municipal resources were distributed, which led to ethnic tension and conflict.

The “Citizen: Decision-making Factor” project in Viti/Vitina resulted in the revitalization of 20 Village Councils, an informal local democratic structure that ensures the concerns of villagers of all ethnicities are effectively represented in local government decision-making. At the final conference, program participants from other municipalities noted that Village Councils could be an effective mechanism for including rural and minority voices in local government in their municipalities as well.

In Lipjan/Lipljan, the participatory budgeting conference convened by the FT was a significant and unprecedented opportunity for village representatives, NGOs, local businesses and minorities to engage in a productive dialogue with their municipal budgeting department. Often, the timing and procedures involved in municipal budget-setting are so complex that citizens have a difficult time understanding when and how to approach their local government about funding priorities. As a result of the conference, 5 new infrastructure development projects were added to the 2008 budget based on recommendations from participants, including a €125,000 road repair project in an Ashkali village. This kind of conference would be extremely useful in other municipalities to help citizens participate more fully in the resource allocation decisions of their local government.
**Lesson 4: Instead of focusing on “reconciliation,” focus on the shared interest in economic development.**

In their facilitated discussions about the key issues causing conflict in their communities, the most common thread amongst all the Working Groups was that the depressed economy and lack of job opportunities in Kosovo made envisioning a shared, prosperous, multiethnic future extremely difficult. In cases where the term “reconciliation” was considered too strong or too political, Working Groups were able to make progress only by focusing on the shared interest of economic development. In two of the municipalities, Bablak/Babljak and Rahovec/Orahovac, focusing on the future economy allowed for nervous, mutually suspicious groups to come together to implement KICCR community projects. In Bablak/Babljak, the library project focused on creating better educational opportunities for the village’s young people, as well as youth from surrounding villages. Members of the working group from all ethnicities could agree that a prosperous future for the municipality would be in jeopardy if young people consistently had to leave to find jobs. The FT in Rahovec/Orahovac saw that economic interdependence was a first step in encouraging people to live together as good neighbors. Even participants who felt that it was too politically sensitive to be involved in a “reconciliation” project were willing to lend their support (or at least not block) projects that had the goal of improving the economy or creating jobs.

**Lesson 5: Invest in human capital for sustainable results**

The KICCR project leaves behind an important resource in the participating communities: the participants themselves. The project incorporated two important levels of human capital creation.

Firstly, the Facilitators themselves are to be commended for their personal commitment, leadership and hard work in the service of their communities. During this project, they not only received training, but also had a chance to put that training to use while leading cooperative initiatives in their municipalities. The coaching and mentoring support of Partners and PK helped them to successfully lead complex multi-stakeholder planning processes, including mediating difficult disputes that arose. For example, in Viti/Vitina the Facilitation Team coped with the issue of one member dropping out for political reasons, and threatening to sabotage the small grant project if another member was not removed.

Having worked for over a year within a multiethnic team, many of the facilitators report that they have developed relationships of trust and familiarity with each other. This not only provides an important example of interethnic cooperation, but also represents a new and dynamic resource, as they have gained credibility as leaders within their communities, and in the future can help raise support for new cooperative initiatives. Each of the Facilitation Teams has reported plans to continue working together for the good of their communities past the end of project.
The second level of human capital lies within each of the participating municipalities. Implementation of the small grants required the intensive cooperation of people from all sectors and ethnic groups. From the “Library Steering Committee” in Bablak/Babljak, to the “Citizen Participation Group” in Lipjan/Lipljan, people from a variety of backgrounds were trained and experienced the benefits of working together. The web of cooperative relationships between stakeholders in these communities is an important, if intangible, sustainable resource that will serve them well in the difficult years to come.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The KICCR Program demonstrated that it is possible to run multiethnic reconciliation programs at a small scale in the current political environment. Despite having the perspective of only one year, Partners has seen significant, if difficultly measured, progress towards greater integration and cooperation as a result of the KICCR program. The target communities were deliberately chosen, but Partners and PK believe that the program could be expanded to include other, perhaps even more challenging contexts – Mitrovice/Mitrovica for example or municipalities where Albanians are the minority. Were the KICCR program to be replicated and scaled up, it would have to be longer to allow better tracking of program outcomes and to give time for more community mobilization efforts, and involvement of more communities.

We hope that the Kosovo Inclusive Community Change and Reconciliation Program and these community projects, however small, are the beginning of further participatory, community-based ethnic reconciliation efforts in Kosovo.